

SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA

The house in which Catherine was born still stands, albeit transfigured—not irreverently nor impiously—by generations of worshippers, on the side of that third of Siena's hills that rises opposite the Duomo over the deep and fragrant Vallepiazza, the hill which is crowned by the great red-brick church of the Friars Preachers, San Domenico. A little further down towards one of the city gates, a gate famous in the annals of Siena's wars, is "her deep green spring," Fonte Branda, from which we can still, with the poet of the *Songs before Sunrise*, gaze "up the sheer street" :—

" And the house midway
hanging see That saw Saint
Catherine bodily, Felt on its
floors her sweet feet move,
And the live light of fiery
love Burn from her
beautiful strange face."

Catherine's family belonged to the class and faction known as the *Dodicini*) or *fa-polo minore*, "to wit, of that rank of people that then ruled and governed the city of Siena." Her father, Jacomo di Benincasa, was a dyer, a simple and God-fearing citizen, pure in heart and gentle in speech, such a one as Giotto or Simone Martini might have painted for one of the first followers of Him whom men reputed the carpenter's son of Nazareth. Her mother, Lapa di Puccio di Piagente, was the daughter of a citizen of the same class of life, who seems to have been also a poet—as many a *pofolano* of that time in Tuscany was : "a woman," writes Fra Raimondo, "utterly alien from the corruption of our times, albeit she was exceedingly careful and busy over the affairs of her household and family, as all those who know her are aware, for she is still alive." At the time of the Saint's childhood, her father was a fairly rich man, and the family all lived together in the house where his workshop was. All that part of Siena is still redolent with the aroma of the dyers' and tanners' labours, and the strange, pleasant smell links the past and present of the people of the city, whose maiden daughter, in Raimondo's phrase, "was made the bride of the King of Heaven." Lapa bore Jacomo a very large family of children. The names are known of five sons : Benincasa, Bartolommeo, Sandro, Niccolo,